

New Trends in Arab Feminist Thought

Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber's *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Evelyn Alsultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Zakia Salime's *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

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Three recent books, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*; *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*; and *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* challenge commonly held assumptions about gender and sexuality in the Arab and Muslim context. A collection of essays as diverse as those contained within *Arab & Arab American Feminisms* resists summation. The contributors are a refreshingly diverse group of Arab and Arab American women, including queer and transgender writers working against the grain of feminist approaches that favor the heteronormative. Creative writers, visual artists, scholars, and community activists offer critiques as varied as the range of their experiences, identities, and social locations would suggest. There are some commonalities, however, that define their collective approach. Throughout, the interconnectedness of homeland and diaspora is brought to the forefront as an inextricable part of the political context that shapes the authors' identities. While several chapters feel crucial to current discussions of transnational feminist solidarity—Mohja Kahf's "The Pity Committee and the Careful Reader" and an interview with Ella Shohat—the book's approach and value is perhaps most visible in one of its more striking essays, Amal Amireh's "Palestinian Women's Disappearing Act: The Suicide Bomber Through Western Feminist Eyes."

The essay eloquently uncovers the continuation within Western feminist discourse of the Orientalist construct that imagines Arab and Muslim women's bodies as passive objects incapable of political action. Amireh

employs Uma Narayan's "death by culture" paradigm to show how Western feminist authors have erased the political and replaced it with the cultural in their analyses of the motivations underlying the violent acts performed by these Palestinian women. Through a close reading of both mistranslations of key Arabic terms that have far-reaching consequences and Andrea Dworkin's, Robin Morgan's, and Barbara Victor's work, Amireh convincingly demonstrates the privileging of sexual politics at the expense of history, class, war, and occupation. The result is that the political is privatized and women are effaced as national agents.

The consequences of the resiliency of the voyeuristic Western perspective that refuses to see Arab and Muslim women as anything other than sexual beings violated by their culture becomes clear in Evelyn Alsultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*. Alsultany does not focus on gender exclusively. Through an examination of the ideological work performed by post-9/11 portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in American TV dramas, films, and news media, Alsultany looks at the disjuncture between the increasing number of sympathetic images of Arabs and Muslims and the simultaneous rise of racist policies like the USA PATRIOT Act. Yet, as the subject of chapters 3 ("Evoking Sympathy for the Muslim Woman") and 4 ("Regulating Sympathy for the Muslim Man"), gender proves critical to her conclusion that though the current proliferation of representations may initially seem positive, it, in fact, merely projects an enlightened multiculturalism while legitimizing institutionalized racism.

Essential to her thesis is the idea that a "politics of pity" are used to produce an excess of affect, as viewers are encouraged to feel outrage and sympathy for the oppressed Muslim woman, who is depicted as the victim of Islamic culture. At the same time, representations of alleged terrorist men depend on a regulation of affect, creating a hierarchy of human life regulated by the American media. In Alsultany's reading, these representations reflect and support the government narrative that connects the oppression of Muslim women with the probability of another terrorist attack. She argues that the explanation for 9/11 based on "They hate us for our freedom" finds its support in the presentation of oppressed Muslim women, the key evidence for "their" hatred. It follows that the war on terror requires not only Muslim women's liberation but also punitive measures against those responsible, that is, Muslim men or Islamic culture more generally. A lucid and persuasive work, Alsultany's book shatters the illusion of a post-race, postfeminist United States, forcing the reader

to confront the role popular representations play in troubling American policies.

Of these three titles, *Between Feminism and Islam* is the only book that focuses on the localized struggles of women's groups in an Arab or Muslim country. In a relational study of Islamist and feminist women's movements in Morocco—often considered diametrically opposed—Zakia Salime illustrates how women have continued to redefine both feminist and Islamist forms of activism over the past two decades. From the 1992 One Million Signature Campaign, which was the first mass mobilization against Morocco's religiously based family code, to the changing strategies adopted after the Casablanca bombings of 2003, feminist and Islamist women's movements are shown to be linked by shared concerns over gender inequalities and the inclusion of women as agents of social change, even if they often operate independently of one another.

Between Feminism and Islam's connection to *Arab & Arab American Feminisms* and *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* can be found in Salime's intermediary location as a scholar based in the United States and an activist with roots in a feminist discourse that frames women's rights as universal. This does not prevent her from providing a remarkably insightful analysis of Islamist women's forms of activism and the type of gender consciousness they articulate. That Islamist women consider their approach to activism more radical than that of feminists will likely be a surprise to the reader, as may the fact that both Islamists and feminists cite patriarchy as the central source of struggle for women's movements. The Islamist women in Salime's study, however, take a broader view of social change; women's emancipation is necessarily connected to the end of men's oppression by authoritarian political regimes, without which there can be no real liberation for women. It is a societal project that rejects the divisions between men and women that they see as characteristic of Western feminism. If an understanding of Third World Feminisms can be gained only by charting the ways they resist Western feminist discourse, as Chandra Mohanty posits, then *Between Feminism and Islam* is an important and timely contribution to this project.

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